

# Giving Voice to a Little Known Battlefield

## South Carolina's Rivers Bridge State Historic Site

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**L**ocated in rural Bamberg County, SC, about 80 miles west of Charleston and 75 miles south of Columbia, Rivers Bridge is the site of a Civil War battle fought February 2 – 3, 1865. It is the only Civil War battle site managed by the South Carolina State Park Service and the only public battlefield in the State from the Carolinas Campaign. Despite its many advantages and the fact that it has been a property of the South Carolina State Park Service since 1945, Rivers Bridge has been underinterpreted. It is relatively unknown outside of the small part of rural South Carolina where it is located. The State Park Service has taken action in recent years to rectify that.

Changes began in earnest in 1997 with the adoption and implementation of an agency-wide plan that redefined the mission of the South Carolina State Park Service. Rivers Bridge was officially classified as a historic site that would be managed according to the needs of its unique resources. An indication of the agency's commitment to the change occurred recently when a swimming pool, a prominent feature at the site since the 1950s, was finally removed as an inconsistent use at a historic battle site and a drain on the site's financial resources. Improved interpretation of the site's primary resource, the battlefield, has long been recognized as a pressing need at Rivers Bridge.

Besides telling the story of the battle of Rivers Bridge, the most determined Confederate resistance to Sherman's march through the State, the site can tell many other stories as well: what motivated the troops of both sides to continue fighting at this late stage of the war, how soldiers responded to the technological changes that had made the battlefield so much deadlier, how Sherman's veteran troops maneuvered Confederate forces out of strong positions by flanking and corduroying roads.<sup>1</sup> The battlefield's well-preserved breastworks offer graphic lessons on the construction and use of field fortifications during the war. And because the preservation of the battlefield stems from an annual commemo-

ration of the Confederate dead that began in 1876, Rivers Bridge also allows for explorations of the memory of the war and the changing nature of the Lost Cause<sup>2</sup> and its symbols.

A full-time on-site interpreter was hired in 1998, but even this most basic improvement to the site's management was not enough to properly present the story of the battle. The interpreter is one of only three full-time employees who manage the site's 390 acres; he cannot be available at all times to give guided tours to every casual visitor. To tell the story of the battle to all visitors, the State Park Service is creating a self-guided battlefield trail. A series of waysides will lead visitors across the battlefield and describe the 2-day fight from start to finish. Secondary stories in each wayside will provide context on how veteran soldiers marched, fought, and tried to survive on the battlefield in 1865. The trail will follow existing roadbeds and paths to route visitors around the earthworks while the waysides educate visitors of the need to help preserve these irreplaceable features of our common past.

The site interpreter has played a major role in the development and implementation of programs for the State Park Service's "Discover Carolina" education initiative. This initiative was created to provide school children with hands-on discovery of South Carolina's natural and cultural resources at State parks. All "Discover Carolina" programs are curriculum-based, contain pre- and post-visit materials, and are reviewed by educators for their ability to communicate subject matter and meet learning objectives. At Rivers Bridge and other State historic sites, children encounter history at places where history was made.

"A Day in the Life of a Soldier," recently developed by the site staff, is a curriculum-based "Discover Carolina" program that introduces fourth grade students to the experience of average Civil War soldiers of both North and South. Using reproduction uniforms, weapons, and gear, the site interpreter leads students through hands-on activities that reveal how soldiers of the time met their basic needs for food, clothing, shelter,

and battlefield survival, and how these soldiers became veterans in the process.

Other “Discover Carolina” programs will be developed to address other grade levels in which the curriculum involves the subject matter of the site. In “The Words of War” students will explore the motivations and emotions of people of the era as they prepared for, fought, and dealt with the aftermath of the Civil War. This program will



*The Confederate monument at Rivers Bridge. Photo courtesy South Carolina State Park Service.*

utilize period poems, speeches, songs, letters, and other spoken and musical sources to gain a better understanding of the people involved in this, our nation’s bloodiest conflict.

To build a greater awareness of Rivers Bridge and its interpretive potential, the State Park Service created a lesson plan for the National Park Service’s “Teaching with Historic Places” program. The plan gives teachers an additional resource for teaching about the Civil War in the classroom. “These Honored Dead: The Battle of Rivers Bridge and Civil War Combat

Casualties” takes advantage of the battle’s small scale to make the war more understandable on a personal level. Both sides lost approximately 100 men in the fighting at Rivers Bridge, far fewer than the terrible casualties incurred in the war’s major battles. Nearly all of the casualties from Rivers Bridge have been identified, however, and the stories of these men bring home the effects of the war with an immediacy and emotional impact that cannot be conveyed by a dry recitation of numbers of dead and wounded. “These Honored Dead” uses the words and images of men who were shot in the battle to present a powerful message on the human toll of the war and the need to preserve battle sites as memorials to the soldiers. The lesson plan went online in August 2002 and can be found at [www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/94rivers/94rivers.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/94rivers/94rivers.htm).

To guide the development of future interpretive programs and media, agency staff wrote the following formal interpretive themes for Rivers Bridge:

- The Civil War battle of Rivers Bridge reflects the campaign strategy and battle tactics

employed by Union and Confederate forces during Sherman’s march through South Carolina, and the small scale of the combat shows the war and its human costs on an individual level.

- Interpretation of the battle of Rivers Bridge permits explorations into wider contexts such as the causes of the war, Civil War military technology and tactics, Civil War medical treatment, the lives of average soldiers, and the effects of war on civilians.
- The commemoration of the battle of Rivers Bridge reveals how the Civil War and the Lost Cause have held different meanings for different generations.

The themes, which are explicitly recognized as being of equal value, institutionalize the broad topics and ideas that may be presented at Rivers Bridge. Besides providing a framework for telling the story of the battle and for telling the other stories that are essential to an understanding of the fight: how and why the men fought, how the campaign affected black and white civilians in the paths of the armies, and how changing and sometimes conflicting memories of the battle and the war shape and color our understanding of the past.

Efforts to convey interpretive themes and resource management messages at Rivers Bridge State Historic Site are not innovative. Similar work has already been done at other Civil War sites. They are the application of interpretive fundamentals at an underinterpreted site and, perhaps most importantly, they are a reflection of how the South Carolina State Park Service is attacking on several fronts to improve interpretation at its only Civil War battlefield.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Corduroying” was the term used to describe the placing of logs over muddy or swampy roads to allow for troop and supply movement.
- <sup>2</sup> The South’s Lost Cause ideology stressed that the North’s greater numbers had destined the South to lose on the battlefield. Even more so, the war was not fought over slavery, an institution deemed beneficial to the happy and devoted slaves, but over States rights.

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